

Message Text

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14

ACTION EA-09

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FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6791

INFO AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON

CINCPAC

AMCONSUL SYDNEY

AMCONSUL MELBOURNE

C O N F I D E N T I A L CANBERRA 7096

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, AS

SUBJECT: AUSTRALIA'S POLITICAL CRISIS

REF: CANBERRA 7069

1. SUMMARY: THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN CANBERRA ESCALATED TWO OR THREE DEGREES ON THE EVENING OF OCTOBER 21 WHEN THE GOVERNOR GENERAL, SIR JOHN KERR, CALLED IN PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM AND OPPOSITION LEADER MALCOLM FRASER FOR SEPARATE INTERVIEWS IN WHICH HE DISCUSSED THE POLITICAL SITUATION WITH THEM. WHILE THE DISCUSSIONS WERE CONFIDENTIAL WE UNDERSTAND THAT THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL LECTURED BOTH MEN ON HIS VIEWS OF AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTIONAL LAW. HE MADE IT CLEAR TO BOTH THAT IF THE PRESENT SITUATION CONTINUES HE WILL HAVE TO INTERVENE. HE DID NOT TELL THEM HOW HE WOULD INTERVENE. HIGHLY RELIABLE CONTACTS ON THE FRONT BENCHES OF THE LIBERAL PARTY NOW BELIEVE THAT THE GOVERNOR GENERAL WILL INTERVENE AT A TIME AND IN A MANNER OF HIS OWN CHOOSING. THEY BELIEVE THAT THE

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GOVERNOR-GENERAL'S POSITION MAKES ELECTIONS OF SOME

SORT INEVITABLE AND INTEND TO CONTINUE TO DELAY PASSING THE GOVERNMENT'S SUPPLY BILLS UNTIL THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL DOES INTERVENE. END SUMMARY.

2. EARLIER IN THE AFTERNOON OF THE 21ST FORMER LIVERAL PRIME MINISTER, SIR ROBERT MENZIES, ENTERED THE FRAY BY ISSUING A SCATHING ATTACK ON THE WHITLAM GOVERNMENT IN WHICH, AMONG OTHER THINGS, HE SAID THE GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN GUILTY OF SCANDALOUS AND DISREPUTABLE BEHAVIOR. MENZIES LENT ALL HIS CONSIDERABLE POLITICAL PRESTIGE TO SUPPORT OPPOSITION LEADER FRASER'S DECISION TO REJECT OR DEFER THE GOVERNMENT'S SUPPLY BILLS IN THE SENATE. HIS ACTION WILL TEND TO SOLIDIFY THE OPPOSITION'S RANKS.

3. THE INTERVENTION OF THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL AND MENZIE'S STRONG ENDORSEMENT OF OPPOSITION LEADER FRASER HAVE INCREASED THE POLITICAL PRESSUR ON BOTH FRASER AND WHITLAM. THE CANBERRA PRESS GALLERY IS FULL OF RUMORS TO THE EFFECT THAT SOME OPPOSITION SENATORS WILL VOTE WITH THE GOVERNMENT WHEN THE SUPPLY BILLS ARE REINTRODUCED IN THE SENATE. GIVEN THE PRO-ALP ATTITUDES OF MOST OF THE CANBERRA-BASED JOURNALISTS THIS MAY SIMPLY BE A CASE OF THE WISH BEING THE FATHER TO THE THOUGHT, BUT WE HAVE DETECTED SOME SIGNS OF UNEASE IN THE OPPOSITION RANKS. SOME OPPOSITION MEMBERS AND STAFFERS HAVE EXPRESSED THE VIEW THAT FRASER MIGHT BE ABLE TO SURVIVE AS LEADER IF HE DECIDED NOT TO REJECT THE SUPPLY BILLS. HOWEVER, THESE SAME SOURCES INSIST THAT THE OPPOSITION WILL STAND FAST.

4. IN LENGTHY DISCUSSIONS WITH SEVERAL ALP FRONT BENCHERS EMBOFFS GOT THE IMPRESSION THAT THE ALP PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATIVES STRONGLY SUPPORT PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM AND BELIEVE THAT THE ALP HAS NOTHING TO LOSE BY CONTINUING TO INSIST THAT IT WILL NOT CALL ELECTIONS FOR THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AS LONG AS IT HAS A MAJORITY IN THE LOWER HOUSE. THEY MADE IT CLEAR THAT WHITLAM HAS NO INTENTION OF BACKING DOWN, CONFIDENTIAL

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BUT THERE WAS A SENSE OF ANXIETY AND CONCERN ABOUT THE RESULTS OF A CONTINUING POLITICAL IMPASSE.

5. THE GOVERNMENT HAS ANNOUNCED THAT THE AUSTRALIAN ARMED FORCES AND MANY CIVIL SERVANTS WILL GO ON LEAVE WITHOUT PAY ON DECEMBER 1 IF THE SUPPLY BILLS ARE NOT PASSED BY THAT TIME. PERCIVAL

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